

Executive Summary

The United States Job Corps is designed to move youth from poverty to meaningful work. It offers youth the key prerequisites to meaningful employment – job training and education. It also recognizes that a truly employable person is equipped to change his or her life direction. Thus, its program offers multiple supports including counseling, social and soft skills training, shelter, food, and comprehensive health care.

Like all programs serving disenfranchised youth, Job Corps has been challenged by program attrition. The objective of this project is to generate a body of knowledge that can guide policy makers and program planners as they take steps to increase retention. The report's overriding premise is that dropout is not a random event; rather it is a process that can be influenced.

In order to create a knowledge base with the depth to help determine the factors that affect program retention, the research team used a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach. This process took advantage of the Job Corps database and uses qualitative research to explore unmeasured student and program characteristics. Five centers were visited where group techniques, interviews, and observation were used to collect student and staff viewpoints on retention. Center Directors and Orientation Managers responded to a series of surveys in which they generated, prioritized, and explained their views. As an added layer of this analysis, a literature review on attrition was conducted and models that could contribute to fostering the type of environment conducive to retention were explored.

Attrition

It is clear that disenfranchised youth – whether through socioeconomic or more personal circumstances – are at greatest risk for dropout. Within this cohort, those youth with negative life experiences, a lack of positive influential role models, low self-esteem, and an external locus of control (feeling that one's life is out of one's hands) are more attrition prone. The ability to buffer stress also plays an extremely important role in one's ability to maintain commitment to a program.

National data reveal that school dropouts differ little by gender but vary greatly by race and socioeconomic status. While groups "at-risk" for dropout are clearly defined, the danger of

overgeneralization in labeling a group as “at-risk” prior to controlling for other variables is documented. Further, the majority of dropouts are youth not in designated risk groups.

Reports on intervention programs all acknowledge that a program attempting to achieve full retention would need to be so selective and rigid in its admissions process that it would likely screen out some of the youth who most need it. No report has yet been able to come up with a highly predictive model based on easily measured characteristics. This suggests that unmeasured factors such as attitude, motivation, personal program experience, or events that occur outside of the program, are the key, but incalculable, factors that affect length of stay.

Three Department of Education sponsored initiatives to address attrition were reviewed. Evaluations of these efforts generated several recommendations relevant to Job Corps that will be presented here in aggregate.

- Staff providing student services should be carefully selected, well trained, and adequately supported.
- Services need to be delivered within a supportive climate that includes adults as student advocates, counselors and mentors.
- Programs should put additional services into the program to serve youth at risk for dropout rather than pull students out of the classroom.
- Services should be delivered without calling attention to the fact that special services are being provided.
- Students should be provided with substantive incentives to participate.
- Environments should be structured and include clear and equitably enforced behavioral expectations.
- A multicultural approach that recognizes the strengths of cultures and targets interventions toward cultures meets with more success.

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative data on 343,097 students who enrolled in Job Corps between 7/1/93 and 12/31/98 was analyzed. Sixty percent of the students were male, 50% were African-American, 28% were Caucasian, 16% were Hispanic, 4% were Native American, and 2% were Asian or Pacific Islander. Forty percent of students were younger than 18 years old at enrollment. Sixty-

one percent completed the tenth grade or lower and 38% were receiving some form of government assistance.

In the total population, 86% of students remained in the program at 30 days, and 64% remained at 90 days. To obtain a gross measure of resources allocated on students who left prior to 90 days compared to those who completed the program, the number of days spent on center were analyzed for all students who enrolled in 1996. Though 35% of students in this cohort left prior to 90 days, they used only 7% of the total days Job Corps invested in all 1996 enrollees throughout their stay. Students who completed the program used 59% of the total days.

Women on centers with less than 40% female representation drop out at higher rates than expected. In centers with greater than 40% female representation, women are more likely to be retained. Conversely, males have higher than expected attrition rates on centers with 60% or greater males, and have lower attrition rates on centers that are balanced by gender or have more women.

White students at centers with less than 40% white representation had higher than expected dropout rates, and conversely were more likely to stay at centers with greater than 40% representation. Hispanic students had higher than expected attrition rates when they were on centers with less than 30% Hispanic representation, close to expected rates in centers with 30-80% representation, and dramatically lower rates in centers with near total Hispanic representation. No clear patterns could be demonstrated for students of African-American, Asian, or Native American heritage.

Data revealed differences between groups in whether they left under negative (AWOL or disciplinary) or more ordered circumstances (resignation or completion). Males were more likely than females to have left under negative circumstances (52% vs. 43%). Fifty-five percent of 16 and 17 year-olds left under negative circumstances compared to 45% of 18-20 year olds and 38% of 21-25 year olds. Fifty-two percent of students with neither a high school diploma nor a GED left under these negative circumstances compared to 34% of students with one of these educational achievements.

The association between descriptive variables and three outcomes of interest (30-day retention, 90-day retention, and GED and/or vocational completion) was explored using logistic regression modeling. The logistic regression allows the association between each variable and outcome to be revealed, while controlling for all other variables. There were several associations

between variables and positive outcome that remained consistent among the different outcomes of interest. Females consistently had better outcomes than males; they were 21% more likely to remain on center at 90 days, and 10% more likely to complete their GED and/ or vocation. Younger students had poorer outcomes than older students. The difference of an added year in age predicted a student was 8% more likely to be retained at 90 days and 12% more likely to complete the program. When compared to Caucasians, Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanics consistently had better outcomes, African-Americans had similar outcomes, and Native Americans had more disappointing outcomes. Students who needed bilingual education were substantially more likely to be retained and to complete the program. Higher prior educational attainment also consistently predicted more favorable outcomes. For each higher grade-level a student scored on his/her entrance tests, there was a 3-4% higher probability of retention beyond 90 days and an 8-9% increased likelihood of completing the program. Students who saw admissions counselors on sites were 25% more likely to still be on center at 30 days and 15% more likely to be retained beyond 90 days. Students who enrolled in urban sites were 16% more likely to stay in the program than students enrolled in rural sites. Finally, even when controlled for other variables, administrative region was important to all outcomes.

The logistic regressions did not substantially increase our ability to predict outcomes. For example, the 90-day retention model correctly predicted the desired outcome 70% of the time. Without modeling, if we had assumed all students stay in the program at 90 days, we would have been correct 64% of the time. This modest increase of 6% in our ability to predict retention reveals that unmeasured variables account for most of the factors that influence retention.

Qualitative Insight

The qualitative results are useful in describing the unmeasured factors that influence whether someone stays in the program. The experts of Job Corps seemed to come to consensus on the following points.

- Intrinsic unmeasured characteristics of students are of great importance in determining whether students will stay. These characteristics include student commitment, attitude, motivation, confidence, maturity level, emotional status, willingness to change, and ability to interact with others.

- Whether a student has made his/her own decision to come to Job Corps makes a difference to the level of motivation and commitment a student needs to fully engage in the program.
- The staff-student relationship is critical to making a difference in whether students commit to the program. Participants repeatedly cited how staff members' capacity to demonstrate support, caring, respect and a commitment to student success was the pivotal ingredient in transforming young people.
- Many students have emotional difficulties and/or substance use problems that may stem from a history of living in challenging circumstances. Students with these problems are more attrition-prone, and require specialized support.
- The ability of students to adhere to center rules, and the ability of staff to convey them in a consistent manner that emphasizes employability, rather than restriction, makes a difference in a student's ability to acclimate to center life.
- Whether the student's vocation of choice is available on center in a timely manner makes a difference to that student's decision to stay.
- Job Corps is a multicultural environment. Students' ability to adapt to and thrive in such an environment is important to their acclimation to center life.

Increasing Retention

The theoretical and practical perspectives of the resiliency and youth development models, developmental psychology, and a stress-coping paradigm are explored in consideration of how to create a center environment conducive to student retention. Resiliency increases students' capacity to overcome those personal and systemic barriers that might otherwise prevent them from meeting Job Corps' challenge as well as lifelong challenges. The youth development model strives to move youth beyond the "we will fix-it for you" paradigm, and instead challenges them to strive to become valued integral members of a community. The stress-coping paradigm presents how to guide students toward positive coping strategies and away from familiar coping strategies that may lead to disciplinary separation. Developmental psychology offers the basics of how to most effectively reach youth of different ages.

A program committed to building longstanding resiliency should foster four traits known as “the four C’s” – competence, character, confidence, and connectedness. Confidence and connectedness must be generated quickly if a program hopes to retain youth. Students who lack confidence will choose to leave the program to save face, rather than taking the risk of experiencing a failure. Reinforcing areas of competence gives an individual the needed confidence to confront future challenges. Students are lonely and homesick when they arrive on center. If they do not quickly gain a sense of belonging on center, they will choose to leave. Possibilities to enhance connectedness include peer and adult mentorship, discussion groups, cultural-pride events and athletics.

Youth want to be challenged. They want to feel that the investment in Job Corps will lead them to feel successful, to be valued, and to contribute to their community. Unchallenged, they may feel that the program will not benefit them and may choose to leave. Young people whose strengths are recognized, fostered, and developed will better survive, more efficiently change, and more creatively overcome limitations to perform better in the work environment. Staff who understand and promote healthy youth development can move students toward positive behaviors and avoid the rebellious confrontations present between mid-adolescents and authority figures.

Youth from stressful environments have often used maladaptive coping strategies to overcome stress. These harmful, albeit temporarily effective, strategies for dealing with stress can lead to program dropout or disciplinary termination. Staff can teach and model for students alternative positive coping strategies. For example, prohibiting drug use alone may backfire because the student may not have alternate coping strategies. Rather than only telling youth what not to do, they must be told what to do.

Conclusions

Some would argue that the easiest way to improve retention statistics would be to profile youth at greatest risk of dropout and recommend they not enroll in the program. Excluding youth at greatest risk of dropout would be inconsistent with Job Corps’ mission of serving the nation’s most needy youth. Further, the quantitative analysis informs us that no easily measurable student characteristics are reliable enough predictors of program dropout to justify excluding any individual. The more challenging approach is to maintain the commitment to

work with youth in greatest need, and to determine steps the program needs to take to maximize their likelihood of staying

The qualitative exploration reveals some of the unmeasured factors that determine whether or not students engage themselves fully in the program. These factors can be divided into three broad categories: 1) intrinsic student factors; 2) personal or institutional barriers that prevent students from attaining the comfort level necessary for them to fully engage in the program; and 3) student-staff interactions. The pivotal role of the staff-student relationship is the common thread between the three categories. Only staff can give students the support they need to develop those intrinsic traits (e.g., motivation, positive attitude, and confidence) that determine whether they will succeed in the program. Further, staff are positioned to minimize institutional barriers (e.g., assuring center safety, eliminating sexual harassment, helping students acclimate to a multicultural environment or shared living spaces) and to help youth overcome personal barriers (e.g., dependence on illegal substances as coping strategies, lack of confidence, loneliness).

Recommendations

The overriding recommendation of this research responds to the pivotal role staff members play in determining the success of students. Job Corps should initiate a staff-development effort to assure all staff members are equipped with the training necessary to maximize their impact on students. The initiative should have clearly defined objectives. They should include staff members' acquiring skill-sets that will assure they are well prepared to:

- recognize and take active steps to lower institutional and personal barriers to students' ongoing participation in the program;
- demonstrate that they expect the best from youth, and hold them accountable to achieving their best;
- build students' confidence in their ability to achieve;
- build students' sense of connectedness to their peers, to staff, and to the integrity of the program;
- generate challenges for young people that enable them to explore their capabilities;
- communicate effectively with youth from different cultural backgrounds;

- foster a thriving multicultural environment;
- model and teach stress reduction and positive coping strategies; and
- communicate effectively with youth at different developmental stages.

If the initiative is well implemented, the potential rewards to student and staff may significantly outweigh the expenditure of resources. If staff-student relationships are made more effective, not only will retention increase, but also every aspect of the program that involves staff guiding, educating, or training students will benefit. Further, like all adults who work with youth with a history of past failures, Job Corps staff members are inspired by young people's successes, but often experience frustration for those who do not make it. A staff development effort that genuinely improves staff members' capacity to tip the scales toward success will lessen staff frustration, increase their job-satisfaction and possibly even affect staff turnover.

Additional recommendations include:

- **Job Corps should strive toward balancing genders at each site.**

The data revealed that women are more likely to remain in the program when the center has at least 40% female students. Men, on the other hand, have an increased rate of leaving the program when the centers have a large male population.

- **Job Corps should study how to best retain students with dependents.**

Though this analysis has not produced data enabling us to definitively recommend how to best support students with dependents, certain solutions seem worth considering. An expansion of non-residential centers or non-residential slots may allow parents greater latitude to attend Job Corps. Increased childcare capacity on sites may both attract more women and allow adults with dependents to attend the program more easily.

- **Recognizing that students with lower educational test scores are more attrition prone, Job Corps should study what extra supports these students may need.**

The challenge is in determining what support may make a difference in a student being able to change a pattern of low achievement. It might be some combination of academic enrichment with measures that build confidence. Further study in this area is warranted.

- **Job Corps should explore how best to serve its youngest participants.**

Forty percent of Job Corps students are 16 or 17 years of age. Qualitative and quantitative analyses confirm that younger age is associated with program attrition. Further study is warranted, but a body of literature and experience exists on how to best engage mid-adolescents, promote their positive behaviors and limit their conflicts with authority figures.

- **Prospective students should receive a pre-enrollment center preview.**

Even when controlled for other variables, students screened for admission on a Job Corps Center were 25% more likely to be retained at 30 days. It seems students with a better idea of what to expect were more likely to stay. It is not feasible to move all admission offices to centers as it would discriminate against youth that live at a distance. It may be cost effective to offer pre-enrollment tours. At the least, a detailed video program describing life on each center should be available for students unable to receive a tour.

Introduction

The United States Job Corps is the nation's largest program designed to move youth from poverty to meaningful work. It offers youth the key prerequisites to meaningful employment – job training and education. However, it also recognizes that a truly employable person is one who is equipped to change his or her life direction. Thus, its program offers multiple supports including counseling, social and soft skills training, shelter, food, and comprehensive health care.

No program, no matter how multilayered or well designed, can have maximal effect if its participants leave before reaching their objectives. Like all programs serving disenfranchised youth, Job Corps has been challenged by program attrition. The overriding objective of this project is to generate a body of knowledge that can guide policy makers and program planners toward steps that would likely increase retention within Job Corps.

The importance of increasing retention within Job Corps can be viewed from three perspectives: 1) as the nation's most aggressive effort to move youth from poverty to work, there is a moral imperative to produce a program that has maximal effect on participants; 2) high dropout makes the program less cost-effective; and 3) failure in a program like Job Corps may do harm to the individual. Each of the youth Job Corps serves has a history of hardship and has taken a chance to better their lives. If they succeed, many will return to be role models in their community. If they fail, they will have to muster even more bravery to take a chance again.

Though this report is about the United States Job Corps, every youth program struggles with attrition. Our hope is that other programs may be able to gather insight relevant to their operations from these data and may learn more through the changes Job Corps may implement based upon these findings.

Several questions must be explored if a serious effort is to be made to address retention within the United States Job Corps:

- How many students drop out?
- When do students drop out?
- Which students drop out?
- Why do students drop out?
- What might be done to prevent students from dropping out?

Job Corps gathers data on the nearly 70,000 students per year who participate in the program. Existing intake and exit data can begin to answer several of the above questions. Because the data record how long each individual stays, it can easily describe how many students drop out and when they leave. The data hold the potential of answering the pivotal question “Which students drop out?” The challenge is in carefully and fairly categorizing students. The existing database can certainly point to trends and associations between easily measured characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race, socioeconomic status) and length of stay. However, these easily measured characteristics only begin to describe people; they tell you little of their experience, their expectations, or their potential. Thus, simplistically describing students poses a real danger of overgeneralization.

There would be two ways in which rigorous research could better elucidate which students drop out. The most useful associations between student characteristics and retention could be made if the existing database included more descriptive student data (e.g., student learning style, personality style, motivation, resiliency, and emotional state) and a detailed record of each student’s experience within Job Corps. Because this database currently does not exist, quantitative analysis remains limited in explaining retention. Alternatively, qualitative research can gain detailed insight from experts (students and those staff who relate to them). Their insight can produce plausible explanations of the dropout process, and can thereby generate hypotheses about the forces at play when a student chooses to stay or to leave. Qualitative data, however, is limited in its ability to demonstrate the direct associations that would confirm these contributors’ hypotheses.

This report utilizes a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach to draw from the strengths of both methodologies. It takes advantage of the extensive data Job Corps collects on its students as well as available information on each student’s experience with the program. However, because the database leaves many student and program characteristics unmeasured and does not detail students’ perceptions or experiences in the program, qualitative research supplements the analysis. Five centers were visited where group techniques, interviews, and observation were used to collect the student and staff viewpoint on retention. In addition, a series of surveys was used to engage Center Directors and Orientation Managers in a process whereby they generated, prioritized, and explained their views on the issues that affect retention.

As a first layer of this analysis on attrition and retention, the literature is reviewed. First, patterns of attrition within Job Corps and other programs are explored, as are the known causes of dropout. Then, the youth development and resiliency literatures are incorporated into a review that considers how to foster an environment conducive to retention.